

Anonymity and Pseudonymity as Interactional Performances*

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Abstract

This essay introduces this issue's Debate section on Thomas DeGloma's *Anonymous: The Performance of Hidden Identities* (University of Chicago Press, 2023). First, it presents its research questions and methodology. Next, it argues the book's acclaim is partially the result of a novel take on Eviatar Zerubavel's *concept-driven* sociology; its distinctively sociological approach; and a seamless knitting between theory-building and rich, diverse, and captivating examples. Further, the book's publication coincides with a renewed interest in theorizing. In closing, I present a handful of critiques by the authors who commented on DeGloma's book: Robin Wagner-Pacifici, Seth Abrutyn, and Lorenzo Sabetta.

Keywords: Anonymity; Concept-driven sociology; Social pattern analysis; Theme-driven social analysis; Qualitative research; Theorizing.

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It's a pleasure to introduce this Focus section of *Sociologica* on Thomas DeGloma's *Anonymous: The Performance of Hidden Identities* (University of Chicago Press, 2023).

In this work, DeGloma draws on three main traditions: symbolic interactionism and the study of generic social processes, the Yale strong program in cultural sociology, and the formal Simmelian approach that his former mentor Eviatar Zerubavel (2020) labeled "concept-driven" sociology.¹ Zerubavel's way of doing sociology aims to delineate generic, if not universal, fundamental features of basic social forms. Put differently, it's about establishing formal patterns abstracted from social life while analyzing only selected aspects of concrete phenomena. Put yet another way, it's about a methodology to develop sociological theory. Working in this line depends on identifying a clear conceptual focus early in the project, even if initially these *sensitizing concepts* (Blumer, 1954) are only "vaguely defined" (Sabetta & Zerubavel, 2019). Building on these traditions, DeGloma proposes a new way to practice "concept-driven" sociology (Zerubavel, 2020): an "hermeneutic cultural and historical analysis of a general social theme" (DeGloma, 2024, p. 279) aptly named "theme-driven social analysis". DeGloma argues that there are three ways to conduct this kind of research, one of them involving the "configuration of analytic subtypes from a master theme". In the case of this manuscript, the master theme is anonymity (no name), and its closely related concept of pseudonymity (a false name). The next steps involve sampling widely to recognize multiple empirical examples related to that theme, looking for similarities as well as² for contextual variations and other differences. From the master theme of anonymity, and the gathering and analysis of several cases, then DeGloma distinguishes several *analytic subtypes*. In the process of gathering material, the researcher asks why an actor would choose to perform anonymously and towards which ends: for *protective* or *subversive* purposes, "the anonymity of social systems" and "the anonymity of types and categories".

This formal approach is both trans-historical and trans-contextual, and it relies on a comparative dimension constituted by collecting material across different levels of analysis. In this sense, it owes both to Erving Goffman and Howard Becker's work, as it is distinguished by "eclecticism and intellectual pluralism" (Sabetta & Zerubavel, 2019, p. 62; see Corte, 2024). Relatedly, DeGloma's interest is in "how anonymous acts share general properties across a range of otherwise different cases and situations" (2024, p. 7). DeGloma asks: What are the general and foundational characteristics of anonymity, and what are its key social dimensions? Why, when, and how actors may try to act anonymously and to what ends? If anonymity and pseudonymity are performances through which actors "disassociate and disconnect" characteristics of their personal identities between certain actions they do, which alternative signifiers do they employ to land a successful performance? (2024, pp. 5–6).

Anonymous is a manuscript crafted through a seamless knitting between theory-building and rich, diverse, and captivating illustrative examples. But these qualities alone wouldn't help us explain why the book won two major sociological awards: first, the 2023 Charles Horton Cooley Book Award from the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction, and second, the 2024 American Sociological Association Theory Section's book award.

As any accolade should be understood within a specific socio-historical context, I wonder how such a lens could help us gauge the book's success. To begin, DeGloma builds on the highly original path that Zerubavel has carved. Yet, such an intellectual legacy remains

1. Zerubavel (1980) refers to Georg Simmel as a precursor to this kind of formal sociology based on a kind of "geometrical abstraction".

2. In Zerubavel's approach, contextual variations and other differences would be disregarded.

niche.³ Originality entails risks (DeGloma, 2024, p. ix). DeGloma takes Zerubavel's approach in a novel direction by combining it with microsociology (symbolic interactionism and dramaturgy), and the strong program in cultural sociology. And consequently, he asks: "How performances of anonymity influence the interactive construction of meaning as contingent and emergence in specific situations?" (2024, p. 5). What are "[...] the ways actors draw on durable cultural codes and historically relevant symbolism, imaginary, and scripted text [...] as they perform anonymity and pseudonymity in their various contexts and situations?" (2024, p. 6).

Second, while the book draws on other disciplinary traditions, such as psychology and cultural history, it is quintessentially sociological. This text is both based on cross-disciplinary insights, as it also rests on an epistemological baseline that ultimately only our discipline could offer: a focus on one concept that is explored dynamically across three levels of analysis — individuals, groups, and institutions.⁴ Further, *Anonymous* is neither a purely theoretical treatise nor a writing invested in social change. It is an erudite piece of scholarship that builds theory while also addressing pressing, timely, intriguing, and at times disturbing social problems.

Third, at least over the last decade, there has been a renewed interest in theorizing, or in what used to be called theory-building. To become anonymous is to act "while intentionally blocking others from recognizing personal identity in outwardly meaningful ways" (2024, p. 5). As such, it implies "action" and thus differs from being unknown (see also Wagner-Pacifici, 2025). Anonymity is precarious (DeGloma, 2024, p. 6), and as Lorenzo Sabetta (2025) contends, it's often destined to fail. Curiosity breeds an interest in investigating. But the situation is more complicated. DeGloma cites artist Banksy: "In the future everyone will be anonymous for fifteen minutes" (2024, p. 169). The artist is "famously unknown". Is this a pun? And as the author puts it, here lies a contradiction: "Anonymity and pseudonymity are increasingly precarious and even impossible to guarantee, yet simultaneously more common. Anonymous actors are obscured and unknown, yet they can simultaneously be prominent and well-known" (*ibidem*).

Lastly: a focus on theory. Among many others, scholars like Richard Swedberg (2014) have written on how to do theory. Gabriel Abend (2008) productively questioned its polysemic character, and Patrik Aspers (Shmidt & Aspers, 2016) argued that we have too many theories. Given that sociology is a theory-driven field (Besbris & Khan, 2017), and that theory is our sacred object, these questions matter. Similarly, Aspers and I asked a deceptively simple question: given the popularity of qualitative methods, how is it that we haven't defined the meaning of its essential feature of being "qualitative" (Aspers & Corte, 2019 & 2021)? Based on an empirical study, we define⁵ this trait while arguing that it is constituted by identifying "new, significant distinctions" which improve understanding for the scientific community. In other words, the output of both qualitative and quantitative research is a qualitative feature: theory. DeGloma's work does theory by zooming in on two lay terms — anonymity and pseudonymity — and then proceeding by explaining how they can be understood as dif-

3. Yet note that Lorenzo Sabetta refers to Eviatar Zerubavel's work as "a marginal classic, neither mainstream nor niche" (2019, p. 57). Eviatar established The Rutgers School (see Brekhus, 2007).

4. In an early articulation of this approach Zerubavel (1980, pp. 26–27) refers to Simmel, who argues that sociology is "not a science with its own content" (1950, p. 14), but that it provides "new analytical perspectives from which to view reality" (1980, p. 27).

5. We define qualitative research as "an iterative process in which improved understanding of the scientific community is achieved by making new significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon studied" (Aspers & Corte, 2019, p. 155).

ferent kinds of social performances to attain different ends via the identification of *subtypes*. Ultimately, anonymity, pseudonymity, and their subtypes become concepts that help readers see the world anew (Wagner-Pacifi, 2025) and researchers to ask new questions. Further, DeGloma has gifted us with an original model to emulate when theorizing, as well as for teaching our students how to do theory (see, Abrutyn, 2013; Fine & Hallett, 2014; DeGloma, 2024; Zerubavel, 2020 & 2024; Lofland et al., 2006).

In this symposium, we start with the reactions of three sociologists working in different countries and at different career stages: Robin Wagner-Pacifi, Seth Abrutyn, and Lorenzo Sabetta. Each of them builds their critique on different traditions: Wagner-Pacifi on Hannah Arendt's work, Abrutyn on Goffman's distinction between virtual and real identities, and Sabetta on an eclectic mix of theorists and classic writers ranging from Thomas Mann, Max Weber, and Alessandro Pizzorno to Fyodor Dostoevski and Jorge Borges.

What is evident by reading their exceptionally thought-provoking critiques, is how generative *Anonymity* has already been. For example, among other questions, Wagner-Pacifi (2025) asks us to consider whether "anonymity can better be conceptualized as being on a continuum rather than as a binary". Additionally, she argues that DeGloma's sampling of secondary sources, such as "texts, images, films", limits our understanding of trying to uncover actors' motivation while acting anonymously. And as if in dialogue with Wagner-Pacifi, Abrutyn theorizes on the importance of whether or not "anonymity is designed to appeal to an actual audience or to whomever". While Sabetta asks: is there "an *impossible anonymity* (of humans in front of God: never incognito) and (an) *impossible identification* (of God in front of humans: always incognito)"? Furthermore, Abrutyn (2025) and Sabetta (2025) not only identify shortcomings in DeGloma's original model, but also formulate their own concepts, trying to improve it. In this sense, both scholars create new theoretical distinctions, trying to push the project forward. And as in fashion for this section of *Sociologica*, the author is given an opportunity to reply to the critics and to argue on whether those new distinctions are indeed "new" and "useful", or not.

Whoever you, the reader, may be, we welcome you to this debate.

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